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ABSTRACT

Concerned basic communication course instructors are in a position to help students avoid personal tragedy by providing them with knowledge of communication theory, research, and skills. However, teachers' roles in helping students who are in the midst of crisis are less direct and should involve referring students to experts trained to advise them. Exposing students to the research on the role of communication in relationship dysfunction and decay is a direct way of influencing students; it provides them with strategies for avoiding or coping effectively with negative relationship experiences. Whatever framework an instructor uses to discuss relational break-ups, students should exit the basic course with a greater awareness of what a deteriorating relationship looks and feels like, and whether or not it is salvageable. However, instructors must realize their limitations as advocates and advisors when approached by students who are not coping effectively--who have experienced or are currently experiencing domestic violence, rape, and resulting depression, substance abuse, or suicidal feelings. The first step instructors can take to help students is to establish a climate of trust both in and out of the classroom. Instructors should avoid using "pop psych" techniques touted in trade books and on talk shows unless they know of sound research that validates their use. When approached by a distressed student, teachers should listen empathetically and nonjudgmentally. Instructors should keep a list of campus and community resources for assisting with students who may have a range of problems. (Contains 39 references.) (RS)

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Running head: PERSONAL ISSUES

DEALING WITH STUDENTS' PERSONAL ISSUES: ADVICE FOR THE BASIC COURSE INSTRUCTOR

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Concerned teachers hope to help students avoid physical and emotional harm that may result from domestic violence, date rape, verbal abuse, and other punitive relational experiences. However, too often they encounter students who are already victims of dysfunctional family or personal relationship patterns. A frustration that is common to caring teachers is the desire to "fix" students' problems, but in an age of litigiousness, teaching assistants and professors must be cautious in dispensing advice they may not be professionally qualified to give. As a result of their efforts on the student's behalf, they may end up inflicting more harm than help. Importantly, we are trained to teach students, but not act as therapists or intervention counselors. Thus, we are in a position to help students *avoid* personal tragedy by providing them with knowledge of communication theory, research, and skills. However, our role in helping students who are in the midst of crisis is less direct and should involve referring them to experts trained to advise them.

The first section of this paper overviews communication research that is pertinent to helping students be prepared proactively to deal with relationship crises, such as violence and verbal aggressiveness, date rape, and relationship termination. Second, the paper focuses on strategies that teachers may use to deal with students who are already victims of these life events, and as a result, may be emotionally troubled, abusing drugs or alcohol, or have suicidal feelings.

Helping Students Be Proactive Regarding Relationship Crises

While Duck (1994) notes that the communication discipline typically focuses on the positive aspects of relating interpersonally (e.g., support, intimacy, love, romance, and maintenance), a well-balanced basic course should also introduce students to the "dark side of interpersonal communication" (Cupach & Spitzberg, 1994). Exposing students to the research on the role of communication in relationship dysfunction and decay is a direct way of influencing students; it provides them with strategies for avoiding or coping effectively with negative relationship experiences.

A large body of interpersonal communication research focuses on destructive relationship patterns (see, for example, deTurck, 1987; Marshall, 1994 [physical abuse and aggression]; Berger, 1994; Bradac, Wiemann, & Schaefer, 1982 [dominance and power]; Leathers, 1979 [double binds and inconsistent messages]; Infante, 1987; Infante & Wigley, 1986 [aggressiveness and argumentativeness]; Levine & McCornack, 1992; Metts, 1997 [deception and transgressions in close relationships]). Research findings in these areas are summarized in a number of basic communication texts (DeFleur, Kearney & Plax, 1997; Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, Sudweeks, & Stewart, 1995; Knapp & Vangelisti, 1996; McCroskey & Richmond, 1996; Pearson & Spitzberg, 1990; Trenholm & Jensen, 1996) and should be presented in the basic course to increase student awareness of: (1) what a dysfunctional communication pattern within a relationship is, (2) the

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relationship between certain communicative acts and physical violence, (3) behavioral predictors of physical or psychological abuse, and (4) practices such as education and increased levels of self-assertiveness that can decrease the likelihood of relational dysfunction.

Unfortunately, not all students know what a negative relationship experience is. Put another way, if an individual has experienced the same pattern of relating consistently (e.g., within the family since childhood), he or she may not know that it is a negative state that could be avoided. The basic course is a forum for increasing student sensitivity to what researchers have identified as harmful communication acts. Marshall (1994) provides a typology of psychologically abusive acts by relational partners (e.g., encouragement of dependence, punishment, deception, verbal aggression, withdrawal, and embarrassment). Moreover, she links each psychologically abusive act to emotional distress and the likelihood of physical violence within the relationship. Presenting these and similar research findings is an important function of the basic course instructor and will increase students' awareness of what is and what is not a physically or psychologically harmful act, and which emotionally abusive tactics might lead to violence.

Once dysfunctional communication patterns have been defined, instructors should focus on the research that indicates predictors of various negative relational cycles. One important area of research links higher levels of verbal aggressiveness to

increased likelihood of engaging in physical violence (deTurck, 1987; Infante, Chandler, & Rudd, 1989; Spitzberg & Marshall, 1990, 1991). With knowledge of these research findings, students have a greater ability to detect aggressive communication cues that may lead to violence within relationships.

Communication research also sheds light on how some negative relationship patterns might be corrected. Interestingly, communicative patterns of aggressiveness and hostility are typically not pathological; rather, they are learned (Berkowitz, 1962; Infante, Trebing, Shepherd, & Seeds, 1984). Thus, once detected, such patterns usually can be changed. Infante et al. note that education is one way to reduce the amount of verbal aggressiveness in a relationship; that is, persons can be taught to argue more constructively and consequently reduce their inclination to use verbal and physical violence. Moreover, Berkowitz found that encouraging a hostile relational partner to talk about his or her true feelings or vent anger is not an effective way to inhibit aggression. In fact, talking about the issue may increase the likelihood of anger, more aggressive behavior, and violence. Alternatively, Berkowitz suggests that individuals learn nonhostile, rational methods (including argumentation skills) for dealing with anger-inducing situations.

An additional area of communication research that is salient to avoiding relationship trauma focuses on assertiveness. Generally defined as a constructive communication trait (Lorr & More, 1980), higher levels of assertiveness may aid individuals

in avoiding situations such as date rape and physical and/or psychological abuse. In fact, findings demonstrate a relationship between assertiveness and satisfactory relationship experiences (Smolen, Spiegel, Bakker-Rabdau, Bakker, & Martin, 1985). Thus, a lecture on the differences between constructive assertiveness and destructive aggressiveness should be included in the basic course. A discussion of assertiveness should include communication tactics (e.g., verbal intensity, talkativeness, volume, affect, inflection [Belleck, Hersen, & Turner, 1979; Bordewick & Bornstein, 1980; Miller & Hersen 1973]) and examples or role plays of specific messages that demonstrate individuals' abilities to act in their own best interest, defend their rights without undue anxiety, express honest feelings, and exercise their rights without denying others' rights.

Moreover, research on communication competence (Gurien, 1996; Rubin, 1982; 1985; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; 1989; Wiemann, 1977) provides students with a prescriptive approach for avoiding or coping effectively with negative relationship experiences. Specifically, the competence model suggests that knowledge about effective relationship practices, experience in a wide variety of communication/relationship contexts, motivation to communicate effectively, and positive attitudes about a communication situation predict one's ability to handle various relationship challenges. Ironically, though, Knapp and Vangelisti (1996) note that the ability to improve one's own communication competence and the communication behavior of a relational partner may be the

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two most difficult aspects of interpersonal relationships. Thus, basic course instructors should stress to their students that relational conflict, decay, and disengagement are common and often unavoidable even for skilled communicators. Consequently, interaction patterns for coming apart should be studied in the basic course, with an emphasis placed on the need to learn from prior communication mistakes.

Whatever framework an instructor uses to discuss relational break-ups, students should exit the basic course with a greater awareness of what a deteriorating relationship looks and feels like, and whether or not it is salvageable. While these might seem to be easily identifiable relationship states, frequent discussions with students indicate that a great number of them do not know when a relationship is in trouble or over.

Counseling Students Who Are Experiencing Trouble

The previous section overviewed several key areas of research that instructors can share with students to help them avoid or cope effectively with negative relational experiences. However, when students approach us who are not coping effectively -- who have experienced or are currently experiencing domestic violence, rape (by an acquaintance or stranger), and resulting depression, substance abuse, or suicidal feelings -- we must realize our limitations as advocates and advisors. This section provides advice for teachers who are asked by their students to provide counsel in times of crisis.

Establish a Climate of Trust/Encourage Extra Class Communication

As Plax and Kearney (1997) note, being an authority on the subject matter and a good classroom manager are not sufficient conditions for good teaching. In fact, when students perceive us as mature authority figures, they may be more inclined to turn to us in times of personal crisis. Thus, the first step instructors can take to help students who are experiencing difficulty is to establish a climate of trust both in and out of the classroom.

Most student disclosure regarding personal issues takes place outside the classroom, during office hours. Students frequently come to us with "excuses" for not completing assignments or missing class that are related to family problems, relationship difficulties, etc. Teachers should not immediately dismiss these excuses as invalid or the behavior as irresponsible. For example, a student recently came to my office to ask if she could turn in a paper a day late because her boyfriend had locked her out of their house and set her clothes on fire in the yard. Was her biggest worry the ten point assignment she had not completed? Like other students who engage in similar self-disclosure with their instructors, the answer is obviously no. Rather, students want their trusted instructors' advice in solving very serious, very real problems in their lives.

While most professors are not in a position to give clinical advice, they should engage in behaviors that communicate to students that they can be trusted, and will direct students to

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expert resources for help. Since most student disclosure takes place during office hours or outside of the classroom, faculty should engage in behaviors that encourage extra-class communication (ECC -- communication between faculty and students outside of formal instruction). Teachers who exhibit an interactive classroom style show interest in students which in turn is interpreted by students as an indicator of the teacher's accessibility for and willingness to engage in ECC (Snow, 1973). Research findings send a clear message to teachers who wish to create a climate of trust: (1) engage in verbally and nonverbally immediate classroom behaviors that promote teacher-student interacation outside the classroom, and (2) communicate to students your trustworthiness, authoritativeness, and the overall value of seeking your help (Shepard, 1996; Snow, 1973).

Avoid "Pop Psych" Techniques

As communication researchers and teachers, we are aware that much of the "pop psych" or self-help literature has no sound research basis. In other words, while most of what we read in the popular press about helping distressed individuals seems intuitively correct, or the "right" thing to do, it often contradicts what *science* says. So, avoid using these popular techniques touted in trade books and on talk shows -- unless you know of sound research that validates their use.

In this era of litigiousness, giving the wrong advice to a troubled student could mean guilt at best and legal trouble at worst for a well-meaning professor. Unless an instructor is

expertly qualified to dispense clinical advice to distressed students, the best advice is a referral to professional counseling services. On most campuses, these are free to students and confidential. One approach an instructor can take is to (1) state his or her concerns to the student and recommendation that professional advice be sought, and (2) call campus counseling services with the student present, and hand the telephone to the student (University of California, Counseling and Career Services, 1997). Often, all it takes for a student to begin solving his or her problem is a concerned professor's guidance to the appropriate expert. Remember, because you are familiar to your students, they will often come to you first, unaware of other available resources. Your campus counseling service can make further suggestions for approaches to take with a troubled student.

Listen Effectively and Appropriately

When approached by a distressed student, teachers should listen empathically and nonjudgementally. When listening, do not overreact to a student's situation (Watson & Barker, 1985); he or she wants to be reassured or helped. Instead, assure the student that violence, substance abuse, neglect, and other tragedies occur in many seemingly "normal" families and relationships. Do not give the student false hope or invalidate what he or she is feeling: for example, avoid comments such as "get a good night's sleep, everything will be better tomorrow," or "crying won't help" (University of California Counseling and Career Services,

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1997). Instead, take the student seriously and let him or her know that while you are not trained to intervene, there are experts who can help. Compassionate, empathic listening is appropriate; however, recall that unless you are trained to deal with the student's problem, suspend judgement or advice.

Adopting a systematic plan for listening to troubled students can be helpful in improving professors' ability to understand them and respond appropriately. DeFleur, Kearney, & Plax (1997) provide an overview of an effective listening strategy: (1) Actively and intensely concentrate on the student's message, (2) Show alertness and interest by maintaining eye contact, forward lean, and facial expressiveness (research indicates that "looking the part" imporves communication accuracy, and that senders will communicate more effectively with a perceived good listener); (3) Search actively for meaning by role-taking, listening for clues as to the person's meaning, asking questions, and providing feedback; (4) Maintain a high level of motivation to listen, and (5) Suspend judgement about the message and the sender (such as cultrual differences and personal prejudices). Other recommendations include (1) ensuring the student's privacy, (2) smiling or laughing when appropriate (to relieve tension), and (3) removing extra stimulation from the environment -- however, closing the office door is typically a risky practice (University of California Counseling and Career Services, 1997). While teachers hope that these types of interactions will be infrequent, listeneing effectiveness

increases with experience.

Know Who the Experts Are and How to Contact Them

Finally, college instructors should keep a list of campus and community resources for assisting with students who may have a range of problems, including domestic violence, depression, drug and alcohol abuse, or suicidal feelings. All teachers should have a list of telephone numbers for the campus health center, counseling services, and police/EMS. Additionally, most communities have crisis hotlines and referral services. Call your campus health center or counseling service for a complete list.

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